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# THE GREATNESS OF JESUS

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If the poet feels that it is impossible to give a worthy description of the starry sky, and confesses that the humblest flower of the field awakens thoughts which lie "too deep for tears"; if the artist acknowledges that he can never hope to put on canvas an adequate expression of what he sees on a cloud-capped mountain, or on some lonely moor by moonlight, or in the infinite reaches of the ocean; and if the man of science, even at the close of a long and fruitful life, spent in the investigation of a single one of the many problems of Nature, declares that all his knowledge is like the handful of pebbles which a child picks up on the wide beach of the sea, how shall any man, though possessing the combined gifts of poet, artist, and man of science, adequately set forth the greatness and the glory of a human spirit and of a pure human life?

"What a piece of work is man! How noble in reason, how infinite in faculty! in form and moving how express and admirable! in action how like an angel! in apprehension how like a god!"

If we may speak thus of man—of any true and worthy representative of the race—what pen shall worthily portray the greatness of Jesus,

. . . . who wrought

With human hands the creed of creeds,  
In loveliness of perfect deeds  
More strong than all poetic thought;

of him who by his personal might of faith and love "lifted the world from its hinges" and started it on a new and higher course?

The task is indeed impossible. All attempts to perform it will ever fall far short of perfect success. But nevertheless the attempt ought to be made. If the proper study of mankind is man, then the study of the greatness of Jesus makes a pre-eminent claim on the thought of mankind. Such study, carried on in a humble spirit and in the love of the truth, will ever fructify the hearts and inspire the courage of men.

There are several ways of approaching the subject of the greatness of Jesus. We might begin with other famous prophets of the unseen, with Confucius and Buddha, with Zeno and Socrates, with Zoroaster and Mohammed, and after getting near to them, and having seen God and man through their eyes, pass on to the gospel and life of the Jewish Master. This is a long way and sometimes monotonous, yet a way that leads at last to valuable results. It is much to see wherein and how far Jesus towers above Socrates and Buddha and the rest, as also to recognize what they have in common. From this point of view we gain an impression of the greatness of Jesus which makes us confident that his religion is destined to supplant all others yet known among men.

Or, again, we may approach Jesus by way of a study of what Christianity

has wrought in the earth. We may even cite his own words in support of this method—his word that a tree is known by its fruit. And yet this way of approach is not so simple as it may at first appear. For there is much in Christianity that cannot claim to have sprung from Jesus, much indeed that is hostile to the pure gospel that he taught.

If we are to approach Jesus through the works of Christianity, we must in some way learn to recognize those elements of Christianity which really flow from him. Otherwise we shall form most erroneous views of his greatness. And this study of Christian history, to find out what that bears the name Christian is really from Christ, is long and laborious. It has surprises and disappointments. Some of the good in so-called Christian civilization is not from Jesus, even indirectly, and much of the evil in this civilization has come, not indeed from Jesus, but from the misunderstanding of Jesus among his disciples. Yet when we at last find out the genuine fruits of the tree, that is, the gospel, then we gain a worthy impression of the greatness of that personal character and life which made these fruits possible. If the effect is unparalleled in all history, then the cause, too, is without parallel.

A third way of approaching our subject would be a study of what the disciples of Jesus have said of his greatness. This way has its own interest and value, but also its own perils. The opinions differ so widely that if we had them all spread out before us, or at least the leading opinions, we might feel it a hopeless task to find our way through them to solid ground.

In some of the earlier centuries men saw the greatness of Jesus in his *nature*, in what they supposed he was and had been from eternity; but in modern times many Christians see the greatness of Jesus, not in what he was by birth, but in what he became by the free exercise of his will. If we look at him through the eyes of the writer of the Fourth Gospel, we shall doubtless see the secret of his greatness in what he was in himself, while if we look at him through the words attributed to Peter in Acts we shall see the secret of his greatness rather in what he became by the grace of God.

If opinions of Jesus within the New Testament itself differ so widely, we shall not be surprised at the differences to be met in the following centuries. It is obvious that this way to a satisfactory view of the greatness of Jesus is beset with great difficulties. If we had the skill and the patience to find out what all the independent disciples of Jesus have held in common with regard to his greatness, we might be on a safe road to a worthy view on the subject, but who has ever had that skill and patience?

There is yet another way of approaching the subject of the greatness of Jesus, and that is the direct independent study of Jesus himself. This is the shortest way of all, the safest, the most satisfactory. The other ways are helpful; this alone is sufficient.

When now we analyze the words and life of Jesus with care and sympathy, what do we learn of his personal achievements? In what element or elements do we find the secret of his world-wide and ever-enduring power? His life

was short, his stage was narrow, and his audience largely indifferent or hostile. By what magic did he lay hold on the mind and the heart of the race so deeply that his vision of a heavenly kingdom has become the foremost motive power in the bosom of humanity? Was it by an intellect greater than that of Shakespere? Was it by a will more indomitable than that of Caesar or Washington? Was it by a tenderness and sympathy greater than any mother's? Or was it by a unique combination of all these sovereign qualities?

Surely no competent student will deny that Jesus was a man of great and luminous intellect. This fact is evident in his grasp of Old Testament history and teaching, evident also in the simplicity and clearness and universality of his own religious thought, and evident in the ease with which, though untrained in the schools and living a life of manual toil, he met and silenced the most astute and learned scribes of his day.

In like manner, no one who is acquainted with the life of Jesus will question that he had a will equal to the severest imaginable strain. He had the strength to refuse a crown. He had the strength to stand absolutely alone at the close of his ministry and to declare himself the Messiah. He had the strength to meet voluntarily the shame and terror of the most ignominious and cruel death. Again, no one but a man of supreme will-power could have resisted the solicitation of his own mother and brothers to turn aside from a public career, and have resisted the whole stifling worldly trend of the Jewish religion in which he had been brought

up and whose hopes were dearer to him than life.

It is plain, too, that Jesus had the charm of a tender and affectionate heart. Recall how he said that they who did the will of God were mother and sister and brother to him; how he bore with Judas up to the last moment; how he took the children in his arms and blessed them fervently; how he said to a poor sinner, "Neither do I condemn thee: go and sin no more"; how he wept over Jerusalem, which was about to crucify him, and with what tenderness he spoke of God.

But though Jesus possessed such a mind and will and heart as have been briefly indicated, these did not constitute his greatness; these did not make him our hope. There was something beyond and beneath these, something more subtle and powerful. The way he *used* his mind and will and heart was more significant than the original quality and endowment of each. His inner experience of religious truth was something more momentous for him and for the world than mere intellectual power or strength of will or tenderness of heart.

Here indeed we stand at the threshold of the Holy of Holies, the realm in which the greatness of Jesus was wrought out in his life as boy and youth and man. That truth of which he had a unique experience was God—the character, the loving presence, and infinite good-will of God. This experience pervaded his mind, determined his will, and inspired his heart. It was this experience, this knowledge of God through experience, that made him the hope of the world, the supreme guide and inspirer of men.

It was his trust in God as his Father and the Father of all men, his assurance of the love of God, and a life wonderfully conformed to this faith, that gave to him his unspeakable and imperishable spiritual influence.

So the greatness of Jesus lay in his power of trusting, and leading others to trust, God. Other men have possessed some measure of this same power, especially some of his disciples, but no one has possessed it in a degree approaching the fullness of his power. He stands alone and far above the great spiritual prophets who were before him; and as regards his disciples and their attainment in any future age, his position will of necessity always be unique.

To explain *how* Jesus reached this supremacy, how much he owed to his richly endowed ancestors and how much to his own endeavors, is a problem that no one has solved. But we have the great and comforting assurance that the distinctive greatness of Jesus presupposes no elements that are not present in some degree in every human spirit. That greatness is the goal set before his followers, not in mockery, as essentially unattainable by them, but in divine

hope and confidence. This goal they are ever to approach, and in approaching they find redemption and peace. What Jesus experienced of God and love we may experience in some measure, and through that experience we come consciously into spiritual life.

The greatness of Jesus is a prophecy of the ultimate greatness of humanity. It is not a fact to make man despair, but to breathe into him an undying inspiration. One may despair of approaching Shakespere. We do not believe, or desire, that all Englishmen and eventually all men of all races should become like him. Here one faces greatness that is primarily intellectual. But the greatness of Jesus, as we have seen, is something immeasurably beyond this, for it is perfection of character, of trust and love and all the qualities nourished by their overflow; and character, though it may be missed by a Shakespere—character of the finest order may be surely achieved by the plain man on the common road. That it is achieved there, more and more widely, is chiefly due, on the confession of those who achieve, to the inspiration that still flows from Jesus.